

Inspirational Eagles named at Leyden High School District

On March 7, the Chicago-O'Hare Rotary, in partnership with Leyden High School District 212, honored twelve students in its eighth annual Inspirational Eagle Awards. The purpose of these awards are to expand what is "typically" acknowledged in terms of academics, and instead to honor students for accomplishments in improving or maintaining academic excellence, attendance, behavior and overall citizenship. Congratulations Inspirational Eagles: Jennipher Almendarez, Mariana Calderon, George Daniel Diaz-Gamboa, Gilberto Flores, Melanie Lobos-Torres, Regina Magana, Nathanael Munjed Livingstone Marji, Vanessa Mendiola-Mandujano, Angelica Negron, Isabella Palmisano, Wilson Rodriguez Parra and Chloe Renteria.

East Leyden



Mariana Calderon

Mariana never understood why when asked for her parent's names, she couldn't put her aunt's name. "She's your aunt, not your mom," people would say, and still do. Mariana has been challenged since birth, starting life being born in Guatemala, with three holes in her heart and a dad who visited her once and never came back.

She was raised by her aunt, a woman who taught her to smile at life, despite the circumstances.

She grew up in a strict household and took care of seven younger cousins. She was always the role model, and led with maturity. When Mariana made the decision to come to the U.S., leaving the only family she has ever known was the most difficult thing she has ever had to do. Adapting to a new way of life was not easy, but she does well at school, has a job, and hopes to attend college so that she can get a good job and provide for her family back in Guatemala.

Mariana is a positive person who inspires and encourages others to keep going and to follow their dreams. She never gives up, is always smiling (like her aunt taught her!), challenging herself, and accomplishing her goals, no matter how long or how many tries it takes.

Mariana was nominated by Ms. Rosen, and she is grateful to her, and so many of her teachers here at Leyden for their love of their work and how that makes students want to come to school and learn. She is grateful for all of the opportunities that Leyden has to offer (from APs to activities) and is happy to say she is a student of this school.



Melanie Lobos-Torres

Melanie came to Leyden as a junior transfer student with visions of the American dream. She wanted to be in a high school, with better education and opportunities. She wanted to get to choose her own classes, something that students aren't allowed to do in Guatemala. She wanted to explore her interests and so she took control of her own life, and she and her older brother moved here.

It was challenging at first - Melanie needed to learn English and was put into EL classes. She didn't know about AP classes at first, and when she did, she asked to be moved to AP, but there were inherent barriers for students in EL gaining entry to APs, even in Mathematics! But Melanie was learning how to advocate for herself, especially from Dr. Jaber and Mr. Jackson, who nominated her for this honor.

In only one year at Leyden, she went from being an EL student to an AP student, taking many AP classes, loving AP Stats and AP Computer Science Principles and is currently also enrolled in AP Calculus and AP physics. She is also self-studying to take the AP Spanish Literature exam. She also took the AP exams for both Spanish and German language and culture, and is the first student in Leyden history to take the AP German exam....and she got a 5! Melanie has earned the State Seal of Biliteracy, won the Fern Award in Mathematics, and is a member of TSI.

Melanie has been accepted into several Engineering programs at different top tier universities. She never wanted language to be her barrier, and it wasn't, because of her dedication, leadership, self-advocacy, and demonstrating that she could do anything.



Angelica Negrón

Angelica was nominated by Ms. Bonilla, and she would like to thank her, and Ms. Araujo, for growing her interest in environmental science, handling personal friendships and confrontations, and how being friendly and understanding can leave a positive impact on the community, respectively.



Isabella Palmisano

Isabella has lived her entire life, in an unstable state of family chaos. From financial struggles including public aid, food stamps, homelessness, to custody battles, she has grown up way too fast. Until recently, she was also a caregiver for her brother, who was disabled and tragically, passed away earlier this year.

And yet, somehow, Isabella manages to show up at school every day, is a member of the Poms squad and participates in Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA). Isabella entered as a freshman and finds comfort at Leyden and considers it her home. She prefers being at school, as opposed to her actual home. It's at Leyden that she feels a sense of belonging and she is grateful for her teachers who push her and support her to be her best.

Isabella is a junior, is interested in business and technology, and hopes to attend college after graduation. She is looking forward to her senior year, and some additional independence and exploration. She is inspired by the future, saying that when she was younger, in that extremely unstable situation, she couldn't see the way out. Through her challenges, Isabella learned how to advocate for her brother, and for herself, at a very young age. Now, she can see herself in college, owning a home, and having a good job.

**Wilson Rodriguez**

Wilson came to Leyden from Colombia, learned English, has a job, and gets straight A's. He has high expectations of himself, and while overcoming conflicts such as culture shock, language, and always being judged as an "outsider," Wilson has matured on his own.

Wilson shares that his experience at Leyden has redirected his moral compass. Before coming here, he felt indifferent to other people, until he began to socialize and understand the value of others. Now, he sees how special it is to live with the other students. He is driven by connections, is committed to school, and most importantly, to helping improve the community of Leyden.

Wilson enjoys the humble pleasures of life, sees beyond academic responsibilities, and instead actively pursues helping others. His goals for the future, in addition to achieving economic stability, is to improve his relationships with loved ones, find peace in himself and put aside worries.

Wilson was nominated by Ms. Reed, whom he is grateful for, as she helped him improve his artistic path and provided the opportunity for him to grow not only in the arts but as a person.

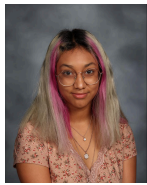
**Chloe Renteria**

Chloe is an artist. An athlete. A daughter of immigrants. And, she has dealt with health issues that affect her daily life - like short term memory loss - for as long as she can remember. She finds herself forgetful, frustrated at times, and scared that someday she will forget everything and everyone. She thinks about that fear every day.

However, Chloe has found comfort and an ability to cope through her artwork. Her drive is the thrill of learning and the creative process. She gives her all to her in classes and is helpful to others whenever possible. What keeps her going is the need to feel useful. She wants to know she has lived her life to the fullest, because she has realized that you never know when you may lose it all.

Chloe plans to attend art school, so that she can keep doing what she loves everyday. She is grateful to Ms. Rosen and Ms. Reed, for helping her to become a better artist and because they have helped to shape her future. And to Leyden, the sense of community has helped her become more socially confident, more of a risk-taker, more comfortable, and really, as she puts it, has shaped her into the person she is today.

West Leyden

**Jennifer Almendarez**

Jennifer is not only a student, she is a mother to a beautiful 2 year-old son. As a pregnant teen, she found herself alone and misunderstood. The team at Leyden really helped her to remain in school in the classes she loved, such as French, while still being able to give her son the mother that he deserves. Jennifer admits how difficult it can be to find balance, and when time is short, she can find herself doubting herself as a student and a mother.

However, these same challenges have inspired her to seek a profession in the medical field, and she is currently part of Leyden Certified Nursing Assistant program. Jennifer is considering a role in pediatrics, and even more specifically, working in a clinic that focuses on teen moms and making that experience a better one for them than she had for herself.

Jennifer is grateful to her dad and the team at Leyden, especially Ms. Laparoux, who provided support and love, in whatever decisions she made. Jennifer gives her all in school and to everything she does, not only for herself, but for her son, and those who have influenced and believed in her. And, she does it with a positive attitude and a smile.

**George Diaz-Gamboa**

As a child of an immigrant, George recognizes first-hand how a person's "status" can affect their overall mental health. He comes from a family that struggles in many ways, including financially, and he wants to help others in a similar situation know that they are not alone. He is extremely community and civic-minded, and is involved in Youth in Government, Student Council, Key Club, Model UN, and is a member of the Leyden Chess Team. He cares about people and finds joy in helping others or simply improving himself, both physically and mentally.

George is proud to represent the LGBTQ+ and Hispanic/Latino communities and feels he helps inspire other students to feel confident to be themselves. In turn, he is inspired by his friends who constantly show him the work is never done and there is always another step to take. His goal is to continue to push himself academically and to live past peoples' expectations of him to show his true, full potential.

He was nominated by Mr. Chaidez, with whom they share a bond over the many clubs they work together in.

**Gilberto Flores**

Gilberto recognizes the sacrifices his family has made to position him for the best possible opportunities. He also recognizes now, through the help of Ms. Kaiden, the effect he can have on other students. It is these two things in combination that inspire Gilberto to do well and be a role model for others, including his siblings.

Through his time at Leyden, Gilberto found himself, through sports and activities, and is an active member of the Army Reserves. Six days after graduation, he will leave for boot camp in South Carolina and then on to officer training. He plans to attend college in Illinois with the funding he will receive from his military service, where he will continue his academic and soccer careers. Gilberto likes the pressure to do a lot and knows that this path will give him the opportunities his parents fought so hard for him to have - and this is how he will thank them, by making the most of it.

Gilberto is grateful for Ms. Kaiden, for truly seeing him, his potential, and watching him grow into the confident person he is today. He can only hope more students have a chance to have a teacher like her.



Regina Magana

Regina had to make the difficult decision to move out of her parents house. So far, this has been a challenging and life changing experience that has forced her to grow up fast and take care of herself. It has made her a stronger self-advocate, and able to push herself to do the best can do in any situation. And, she tries to do it with a smile and a positive attitude. Regina believes it is all worth it in the end.

Regina transferred to Leyden from nearby high school her junior year, and knows that this is a better place for her. She is learning more about herself and her strong abilities, and she has the courage and determination to graduate and not let anything hold her back. She hopes to attend college, continuing meeting new people, and making strong choices towards a successful life.

Regina would like to thank Ms. Waddell and Ms. Hernandez, her dean and her counselor, for helping her to finish school and for going beyond their roles to provide her with the support she needs.



Nathanael Marji

While Nathanael was born in the U.S, he was raised in Kenya and Sudan from the time he was a one-year old. Then, in the second semester of his 8th grade year at a very small private school in a communal society, his family relocated back to the U.S. and Nathanael was enrolled at West Leyden as a freshman. Leaving everything behind that was familiar to him, Nathanael lost his sense of community coming to such a large school and a new way of life. Over time, he started to learn more about his own identity and individualism, and how to expand his comfort around different people and personalities. After a while, the U.S. started to feel like home.

At Leyden, Nathanael excels at school, has a ton of new friends, and enjoys the many resources that are available to students. Leyden provides students with endless opportunities to explore careers and through that, Nathanael found his passion in pharmacy. He will be attending Purdue University this fall and will study to become a Doctor of Pharmacy.

Nathanael was nominated for this award by Ms. Waddell, and would also like to thank Dr. Veltman and Mr. Vazquez, who helped him grow his critical thinking skills and his love of chemistry, respectively; skills Nathanael knows are extremely important as he continues on his educational journey.



Vanessa Mendiola

Vanessa lost her father at a young age, a man who was a big part of her life and continues to inspire her to do good in school. She promised him that she would continue to work hard, and it's that promise that keeps her going in her toughest moments.

Despite the challenges of helping to take care of her father when he was sick, and going through this tremendous hardship, Vanessa keeps her head high and remains motivated. She learned time management skills that help her juggle school, sports and a social life. Vanessa is a dedicated runner, a leader on the team, and strives to reach her goals and create bonds with her teammates. She even finds ways to make her friends and family smile.

Vanessa is interested in becoming a physician, and hopes to attend one of the universities where she has applied. No matter the journey ahead, Vanessa will keep working hard to make her father proud.